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ABSTRACT

The process of making one's own mask and having one's mask made was offered as an experiential exercise for a group of Outward Bound students training to be Outward Bound instructors. The integration of expressive arts with outdoor experiential education was an attempt to encourage balance between the technical and interpersonal skill development of leadership among experiential educators. The instructor supervised 10 students, aged 19-28, during the Outward Bound Instructor Development Practicum. The mask-making process requires two people; one to make the mask and the other to provide his or her face as the mold for the mask. The process sets the stage for a dynamic experience that invites an intimate exchange between two people. Issues that arise from the experience are related to intimacy, trust, faith, and compassion. The person having the mask made may have up to 45 minutes under the mask. The time under the mask while waiting for it to dry is an opportunity for a reflection experience, which is an important part of experiential learning. Prior to the mask making, students discussed perceived risk and real danger associated with the activity, and developed standards in an effort to support an emotionally and physically safe environment. Students shared their experiences after the process. Everyone agreed that the mask making was anxiety provoking because of feelings of vulnerability and being out of control. This activity must be chosen carefully, considering the level of preparedness of the group.

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Mask Making

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MASK MAKING: THE USE OF EXPRESSIVE ARTS
WITH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Biographical statement:

Angela Thomas Jones, M.A. works in private practice as an expressive arts therapist specializing in recovery from addictions. She also works on a part-time basis with Outward Bound Schools throughout the United States.

MASK MAKING: THE USE OF EXPRESSIVE ARTS
WITH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The process of making one's own mask and having one's mask made as presented here was offered as an alternative experiential exercise for a group of Outward Bound students training to be Outward Bound Instructors. This process is applicable to a variety of settings beyond Outward Bound and has been used with adolescent and adult substance abuse treatment, psychiatric hospitals, community organizations, public and private high schools, corporate management teams families, and many other groups.

The integration of expressive arts with outdoor experiential education as represented here is a result of an attempt to encourage balance between the technical and interpersonal skill development of leadership among experiential educators. I first began using forms of expressive arts in the field of outdoor experiential education several years ago while working as an Outward Bound Instructor. Often times would occur while out in the field when verbal and intellectual processing of significant experiences just didn't seem to serve the purpose of integrating

meaning from that experience into the reality of the individual or group.

I began experimenting with various mediums and techniques of expressive art forms and found that this served as a common ground for participants to put form, shape, and color to their experiences. Through the process of creating a picture, a movement, or a song, participants may experience their own authentic experience which often assists with integrating meaning and relevance of that experience to their lives. This integration has also served myself in allowing me to be more authentic as an artist working in the field of outdoor experiential education. Although this work is authentic in nature, the philosophy and methodology represented here are not unique to my research and practice, nor are these ideas new; rather, they are an alternative perspective on familiar material. It is also important to mention that one does not have to be an "artist" to use expressive art materials or activities. All one needs is willingness to take a risk with another way of doing familiar things.

The theoretical basis from which I have drawn the methodology for integrating the expressive arts with outdoor experiential education deserve mention. However, indepth discussion of theoretical concepts goes beyond the scope of this

article. Several sources of theoretical basis are: Reality Therapy (1990), developed by William Glasser, M.D.; Existential Psychotherapy (1990), as defined by Irving Yalom; and the concepts of Janie Rhyne described in "The Gestalt Art Experience" (1973). The common thread among these perspectives is the innate respect and acknowledgement of the individual as one's own valuable teacher with focus on the present moment as the critical time of learning and development. The role of the facilitator of these processes is viewed as one of partnership rather than authoritarian leadership. This concept of partnership leads to the idea that every life experience is a valuable lesson.

Expressive arts can be any form of authentic expression which does not bring harm to one's self, others, or the environment (Thomas Jones, 1989). Some forms of expressive arts are dance, music, martial arts, photography, writing, drawing, doodling, singing, gardening, drama, and many others. Peter London states in his book No More Second Hand Art (1989) ,

Creative Encounters differ substantially from the usual art lessons or art projects encountered in art schools. These encounters are initiated first by having an authentic encounter with a significant event, question, or issue, one that demand a full reflective response (p.xv).

The intention of this article is to focus on the process of the mask making experience rather than the content. Discussion of

art, expression, and theory require a more indepth presentation and will only be mentioned here. The point which is most relevant to the presentation of the process of mask making in relationship to the content of art and expression is best summarized by Mathew Fox who describes authentic art in his book Original Blessing (1983).

. . . only art as meditation allows one to let go of art as production a' la capitalism and return to art as process, which is the spiritual experience that creativity is about.
. . . Only art as meditation reminds people so that they will never forget that the most beautiful thing a potter creates is the potter (p.193).

Authenticity is key to any experiential education curriculum. The authentic behavior of one's self as an educator among peers as well as among students. The essence of experiential learning is in the authentic experience of the learner. Dave Talamo addresses the issues of comfort levels and authenticity among experiential educators in his article "Where are the Risk Takers?" (1990). The significance of "personal comfort levels" and "authenticity of educators behavior" with colleagues and students is the focus of this particular use of mask making in the leadership training curriculum of experiential educators.

Talamo (1990) comments "If we cannot take risks in our own

circles, then where can we do it? If we can't show our students that we live by our values, then our words are hollow" (p.46). His remarks lead me to ask what is it that an experiential educator can do to encourage risk taking? Many of these things are part of the interpersonal skill development of experiential education curriculums and Talamo suggests modeling as one of these things which promote risk taking. The saying, "Walking your talk" best describes this form of modeling. Questions like these have significantly influenced my development as an outdoor experiential educator, artist, and therapist, as well as having strengthened by humility and respect for the entire learning process.

My own bias toward these questions is found in my belief in student-centered experiential education; one learns most effectively by doing. Therefore, how does one teach in a student-centered experiential environment? This question was the focus of the mask making experience presented to the Outward Bound Instructor Development Practicum (NCOBS, 1990) students.

The Outward Bound Instructor Development Practicum had ten students, ages 19 - 28 and three staff members. I served as one of four staff who were hired to supervise the "Mini-Outward Bound" course. The Mini-OB course is a practical experience similar to that of traditional student teaching. We had four crews of eight

to twelve students ages 13 - 16; all of whom were from local communities.

During the evaluation of these courses, it became apparent to the instructional staff of the training course that most of the students seemed primarily focused on the logistics and physical elements of their courses rather than the interpersonal dynamics among their group members.

Mask making was presented as a complementary activity to the established process of written and verbal evaluations. It was framed as an invitation to experience, through an introspective manner, the issues which influence one's willingness to take risks. The focus of this experience had several objectives:

- 1) Provide an alternative experiential format for processing the "student teacher" experience with emphasis on interpersonal dynamics.
- 2) Provide an experience which would place the participants in a situation requiring their own trust, compassion, and faith in one another.
- 3) Raise awareness of factors which influence the development of trust, compassion and faith.
- 4) Begin to integrate the experiences of the entire course in preparation for final closure.
- 5) Demonstrate that having courage is not restricted to technical skills nor physical challenges.

It was spring and the weather was clear and warm; therefore,

we were blessed with the opportunity to do mask making out of doors. Trying to create a relaxing environment in the artificial atmosphere of a closed room presents challenges separate yet vital to any expressive art activity. The mask making process demonstrated in this situation requires two people; one to make the mask and the other to provide his or her face as the mold for the mask. The process sets the stage for a dynamic experience which invites an intimate exchange between two people. Often times issues which rise from the experience are related to intimacy, trust, faith, and compassion.

The actual construction of the mask usually takes about ten to fifteen minutes and depending on the level of humidity, the drying of the mask material can take up to thirty minutes. The person having the mask made may have up to forty five minutes under the mask. The time under the mask while waiting for it to dry is an opportunity for a reflection experience which is an important part of experiential learning; a time of introspection and relaxation. This always creates interesting discussion about how we use our time and our concepts of "doing nothing". Discussing "doing nothing" usually has an impact on adults who identify themselves as being swamped with schedules, deadlines, meetings, appointments, etc. This discussion often leads into

identifying systems of beliefs and work ethics and their role in determining the amount of stress we find acceptable in our daily lives. Several people during this discussion identified time to read a book, take a walk, or just sit, they would either feel guilty or consider it being lazy.

Prior to setting up the materials for the mask making, the group was asked if anyone had questions or comments before beginning to make the masks. There was one question: "Do we have to do this?" My response: "If you heard this question during your time with the Mini-OB students, what was YOUR response?" We laughed together at the irony of our situation and agreed that often when this question is asked, it can be a signal of apprehension regarding the proposed activity. We discussed the value of presenting making CHOICES as more than doing IT; IT being the event of the moment, or not doing IT, but that making choices involves getting more information to make a choice based on facts rather than fear. Perceived risks and real danger were discussed and the influence of perceptions and fears on making choices.

A few of the perceived risks of those making the masks were identified as not being able to breathe and suffocating while under the mask, not being able to get the mask off once it had dried, and losing control of one's feeling of claustrophobia.

These were certainly remote possibilities but nevertheless, they were real in the thoughts of the participants. Risks for the wearers of the masks were the possibility of feeling humiliated, being made fun of, or being taken advantage of while under the mask. For the makers of the masks, risks named were, "not doing it right" because of either not understanding what the person wanted or somehow making a mistake with the application of the materials. Real dangers were limited to potential skin irritation from the mask materials which was not identified as "dangerous" by the group members. No other real dangers of mask making were identified.

The concept of perceived risk and real danger is a tool for dealing with fears and identifying the steps for working through difficult situations and making choices based on fact rather than emotional reaction. Several of the participants related this concept to their recent experience with the Mini-Outward Bound course. During a climbing presentation, one of the participants explained how a student climber reacted hysterically to the possibility of climbing inspite of having successfully completed the ground belay school. The student climber had apparently focused on "I'll die if I do that": rather than on the information that had just been given to them during the practice at the ground

belay school. The student instructor explained how he attempted to re-explain everything that had just been presented but nothing seemed to work to help give the student climber the courage to take the risk to climb. Eventually the student climber completed their first climb with the support of the group members and staff and without injury. The student instructor was not able to identify any one thing that happened for that particular student to take the risk to climb. It was his speculation that peer support and peer pressure played a significant role in the student's choice to climb.

The following standards were developed by the participants of the mask making workshop as a result of the discussion on perceived risks and real danger. These standards were created as an effort to support an emotionally and physically safe environment for making masks which would encourage taking risks.

- 1) Everyone agreed to respect the masks as a symbolic representation of a sacred relationship which was defined as "something we create and choose to be part of . . . we are accountable for creating a space which nurtures that relationship."
- 2) The maker of the mask will speak with a soft tone of voice and not poke fun or make jokes during the making or drying of the mask.
- 3) The maker of the mask will respect the choices of his or her partner and ask questions if unclear about his or her partner's wishes.

- 4) The person who is having the mask made will inform the maker of the mask of his or her choice to have or not have their eyes and or mouth covered.
- 5) The person under the mask may take off his or her mask at any time during the process and does not have to wait for the facilitator to tell them when to take off their mask.

No two individuals described identical experiences, but all shared feelings of discomfort about having the mask made on their face; particularly having their eyes and mouths covered. Everyone agreed that the mask making was anxiety provoking because of the feelings of vulnerability and being out of control. They also agreed that because of the familiarity and trust they had developed during their several weeks of being together, it was much easier to experience their anxieties than they had anticipated.

One individual, who had previously participated in this form of mask making, became tearful while under the mask, yet chose to remain under her mask. During discussion after the masks were removed, many participants spoke to the experience of being with someone who becomes emotional to the point of crying. Many stated they had the desire "to do something to make it better" and they "were uncomfortable with being in the situation of not really knowing what was going on at the time of the tears". This

discussion raised the topic of personal comfort levels, as well as the importance of trusting the process of learning and respecting the other person's rate of learning, rather than reacting to one's own urge to "fix it".

The discussion which grew from the experience of wanting to "fix it" was related to the various roles of leadership one takes with a group while in the process of learning. Several participants of the mask making experience claimed they had not viewed the act of helping someone figure out a problem by stepping in to show them "how to fix it" as potential interference of the learning process. However, after the group shared their feelings regarding their experience with the mask making, many identified their own comfort level as a motivating factor of when they would choose to step in and offer to "fix it" rather than respecting the choices of another individual or group members and "doing nothing". During this discussion the role of enabling in co-dependent relationships were reviewed. Barry and Janae Weinhold (1989) discuss the concept of co-dependent systems in their book Breaking Free of the Co-Dependency Trap:

Any system in which members are not encouraged to be self-reliant, self-directed and individually responsible creates passive people who are apathetic, helpless, fearful and unable to facilitate changes that need to be made in the culture (p.33).

The woman who became tearful during the mask making had been open about her history as a survivor of childhood abuse and neglect; therefore, the group was familiar with this personal history and the role it might have played in the exercise. The woman had stated that she had done this type of mask making before and had been unable to manage the anxiety of vulnerability and the sense of being out of control. These particular issues had been a personal challenge for her throughout the entire course and an area she wanted to strengthen, thus her choice to once again participate in mask making. She stated that many factors influenced her willingness and confidence in this experience. Of particular importance were the agreements of standards which the group established prior to beginning the mask making and the emphasis on personal choice throughout the entire experience including the option to choose to stop the process at any time. She also commented that her crying was about "feeling powerful and good about trusting her partner and feeling safe in such a vulnerable state." She also commented that she was grateful that no one stepped into "fix it" for her so that she wouldn't cry. She also pointed out that she and her partner had established a standard of trust which was supportive of authentic emotional responses like crying. Many agreed that while under the mask they

experienced sensations of "invisibility and heightened awareness" which were more enjoyable than they had anticipated; yet these feelings were experienced toward the end of the process after they had gone through feelings of "panic, anxiety, and fear" related to their perceived risks.

The participant's experience of crying presented an opportunity for the whole group to share reactions and examine personal comfort levels with intimacy, trust, compassion, and faith. Such issues could include triggering emotions based on past traumas, therefore, it is important to respect these issues, be aware of one's own intentions in presenting such an activity, and have a plan of support for the group and its members during possible responses.

This type of mask making is not appropriate for every situation and the decision to use this activity must be chosen carefully, just as choosing when to take a group of students on a multi-pitched climb. The level of preparedness of a group to move to another level of development is often found by observing their level of interpersonal and technical skills. The more skill an instructor, therapist, teacher, or any leader has in reading this evidence, the more powerful they may be in the design and facilitation of their curriculum.

Some of the evidence for the readiness of a group to experience this type of activity would be stated on intake forms, references, or medical forms. This material would provide information which may not otherwise be obvious in the classroom or during an outdoor experience. Other sources for assessment of the readiness of a group is within the dynamics of the group itself. Some of the characteristics one could observe are: the level of trust, their willingness and ability to work through conflict, problem solving strategies, to what extent do members support one another, and how have they dealt with stress in previous situations? There is always your own instinctual response and expertise to "what to do next". The beauty of this process is that the student often serves as a teacher to the instructor, and the "powers that be" to both. The challenge to the instructor is to respect and honor this exchange by knowing when to step out of the way of the natural process and when to allow other factors to serve as teachers and remain open to being a student among students as well as among colleagues.

"Walking our talk" requires more than simply taking risks but also a rigorous honesty which demands humility and compassion. These characteristics develop as we allow our experiences to be authentically our own as well as being intimately connected with

other people's experiences. The mask making workshop presented an opportunity for potential outdoor experiential leaders to better understand the value of balance with technical and interpersonal skills while learning and teaching as well as the interdependence of these skills. Another key result of this experience was that many of the participants claimed to have learned more than they had anticipated about themselves. The introspective nature of the mask making experience placed the participants in the situation where their focus was more upon their personal process rather than that of the group.

The North Carolina Outward Bound Readings Book (1980) includes a quote from Ruth Cohn which expresses the value of using any form of process oriented activity as part of working with groups. She states,

Intimacy in interaction is strengthened whenever the focus is on feelings and processes, rather than on thoughts and problems. This bond of understanding seems to grow beyond this circle out into the space, to groups anywhere - classrooms, offices, society. People are alike in being different. They need to be affirmed as individuals (p.37).

Expressive arts as described through this mask making experience are process oriented experiences. This particular experience is best summarized by one of the participants who stated, "Now I know what my student was really feeling when he asked me, 'Do you have to do this?' I understand and know I can be

more compassionate because although it (the mask making experience) was a different path, I've experienced the feelings he must have been having at the time of that climb . . . for I've walked in his moccasins."

Author Notes

The masks made in this workshop were later used as part of the closing ceremony for the participants of the training course.

The author would like to thank the students and staff of the spring 1990 North Carolina Outward Bound Instructor Development Practicum for giving permission to photograph and write about their experience with mask making. Readers are invited to respond to this article by writing the author at West Farm Road, Littleton, NH 03561.

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